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Backus Memorial Baptist Church  
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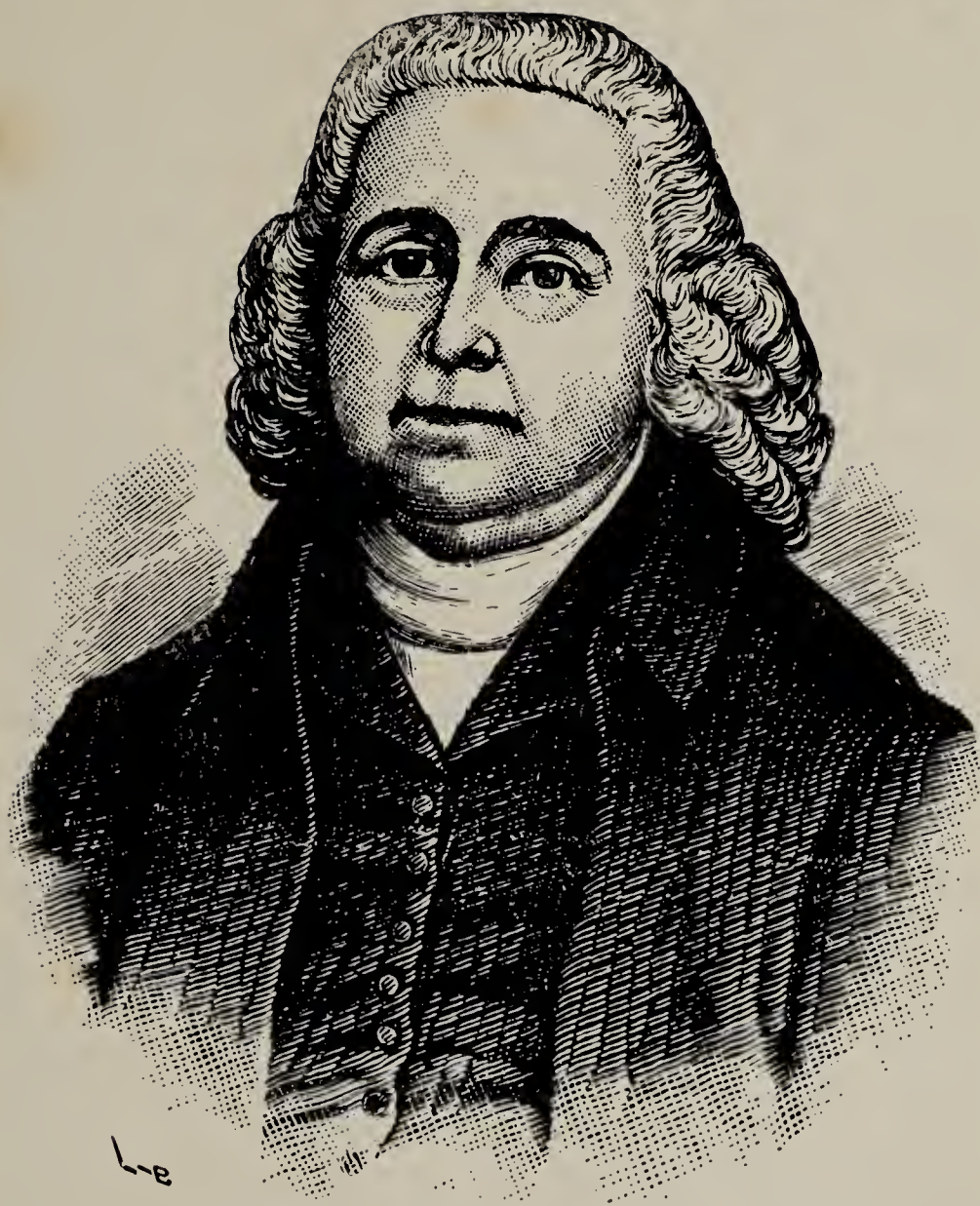
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REV. ISAAC BACKUS,  
the first pastor of the First Baptist Church, Middleborough,  
1756-1806.

## BACKUS MEMORIAL BAPTIST CHURCH

### BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE OF ITS FOUNDER

Whether or not the description, "self-made man," can truly be applied to anyone, this is surely not descriptive of the founder of the First Baptist Church of Middleborough—at least not without reservation. Isaac Backus earned acclaim for leadership in many fields of endeavor by real diligence, but, if we look at his ancestry, both maternal and paternal, we shall see that he inherited an aptitude for greatness. Looking first to his father's side of the family, we find that the earliest representative of the family name in America was William Backus, who, about 1637, came from England on the *Rainbow* and settled in Saybrook, Connecticut. Afterward, in 1660 (1659 in records using old style dating, for New Year's Day until 1752 was March 25th), William and one of his sons, Stephen, were among the thirty-eight settlers and founders of Norwich, Connecticut. By consent of his fellow-planters, William Backus gave the town its name. The home which he built in 1660 is still standing and in excellent condition. William Backus is the great-great grandfather of Elder Isaac Backus. A brief word about Elder Isaac's grandfather, Joseph Backus, should not be omitted. In the early 1700's he was a leading figure in the town and for several years represented Norwich in the Legislature of Connecticut. In his day the trend was toward a state church and toward civil-government control of the churches. Joseph Backus was adamant against his own church's agreement to accept control of the Church by the State. For his opposition he was censured and finally expelled from his church. For several years he made journeys to Ipswich and Boston (where he visited the Mathers) and to other places in the interest of ecclesiastical independence. His home church in Norwich, at last in 1716, decided against approval of control by the civil government. We shall see his zeal and untiring efforts for religious liberty duplicated in the life of his illustrious grandson.

We owe to Isaac Backus' own pen the information that his mother, Elizabeth Tracy Backus, "sprang from the family of Mr. Winslow, who came over to Plymouth in 1620." Isaac Backus' great-great grandfather, Josias Winslow, was a brother of the Mayflower Winslow. Pages could be written about Edward Winslow, this earliest relative of Isaac Backus in

America, but a few particulars will reveal something of the versatile character of the man. He was one of the leaders of the Mayflower pilgrims. It is especially worthy of our notice that in that first summer after their arrival in the new land, when the Pilgrims at Plymouth were anxious for friendship with the Indians, Governor Bradford sent Edward Winslow and another Pilgrim to visit Chief Massasoit. In Winslow's Diary he speaks of what is now called the Taunton River: "Upon this river dwelleth Massasoyt." Enroute to the meeting with the great Indian chief, Winslow and his companion found a friendly tribe of Indians, the Namaschucks, "they so calling the men of Namaschet," at Titicut on the Taunton River in the northwest part of Middleborough. Here, on July 4, 1621, they exchanged gifts and spent the night with the Indians. In the same year Massasoit made a treaty with the Pilgrims, the earliest recorded in New England. It was faithfully observed for 54 years.

Edward Winslow is called "one of the founders of Plymouth Colony." He served three terms as Governor of the Colony and made frequent voyages in the intervals between to England in the service of Plymouth and Massachusetts colonies. How significant that, when visiting Britain in 1635, he was imprisoned for 17 weeks by Archbishop Laud on a charge of heresy! (Specifically the charges were that he taught in the church, though a layman, and performed a marriage as a magistrate.) This relative of our Separatist Baptist Isaac Backus was a Separatist Puritan, and opposed the state church of England just as Isaac Backus a little over a century later was to oppose the established church of Massachusetts. Moreover, the established church of Massachusetts was the "separatist church" of Governor Winslow's day! He as well as our Elder Backus was zealous for the proclamation of the Gospel; in England in 1648 he was instrumental in founding "the Society for promoting and propagating the Gospel of Jesus Christ in New England." In December, 1747, when Isaac Backus first came to Titicut, he found there an Indian church, very likely the result of the missionary activity of the society which Governor Winslow had organized in London a century before.

Such is the picture afforded by a few glimpses of the ancestors of Isaac Backus. It is lamentable that so little is known of his own childhood and youth. His writings reveal only fragments of his early life; and his first biographer, Dr. Alvah Hovey, President of Newton Theological Institution,





Birthplace of Isaac Backus

though he published a thorough and remarkable Life of Baekus, wrote a half century after the death of the Elder—too late to discover undocumented information about Backus before he became a public figure. We do know that Isaac Backus was born in Norwich on January 9, 1724, the fourth of eleven children. The wonderful old house in which he was born has recently been torn down. It was built in 1660 on a 90 acre tract of land and had 22 rooms with 10 fireplaces and two chimneys; an adult could stand erect in the dining room fireplace. The upstairs floors were made of 19 to 21 inch planks. The house was put together with handmade nails and the doors hung on handmade butterfly hinges. The native wood paneling was so solid that in recent years screws could not be driven into the walls. A recent resident of the old homestead says that the paneling sold for \$15,000 a year ago when the house was sacrificed to clear the route for a new superhighway! Wreckers were unable to break the beams of the house and they had to be sawed for removal. Baekus says of his home that he was there “well educated in the Christian religion and also in the principles of civil liberty.” His father, Samuel Baekus, died when Isaac was 16. Samuel was a farmer and the owner of the only industry in Yantic, the

Iron Works. To Isaac's mother fell the responsibility of 11 children, one of whom was a baby; she was an excellent woman of fervent Christian character, and Backus' writings often indicate his deep respect and love for her.

#### CONVERSION AND CALL TO THE MINISTRY

Though in a religious home with the early training of a devout Christian mother, Isaac Backus did not come to a personal experience of salvation until his eighteenth year. In his own account he says that he had "secretly imagined that it would abridge his personal liberty and comfort." In 1740 and '41, the revival of religion known as the Great Awakening was stirring the country under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and others. Backus had no opportunity to hear the foremost of the revivalists, but he came under profound conviction of his sinfulness and utterly hopeless condition. He writes, "God laid open to me the plague of my own heart and the folly of seeking life by my own doings." On August 24, 1741, as he was plowing alone in the field, his past life seemed to unroll before him. He says:

*I saw clearly that it had been filled up with sin and perceived I could never make myself better, should I live ever so long. I was enabled by divine light to see the perfect righteousness of Christ and the freeness and riches of His grace with such clearness that my soul was drawn forth to trust in Him for salvation. And I wondered that others did not come also to Him who had enough for all. The Word of God and the promises of His grace appeared firmer than a rock, and I was astonished at my previous unbelief. My heavy burden was gone, tormenting fears were fled, and my joy was unspeakable.*

Though anxious about conditions in the "regular church" in Norwich, which had become a state church since his grandfather's day, Backus united with it for about three years, hoping for reformation. The hopes of Backus and others soon changed to despair as conditions grew worse: members were received into the church without satisfactory evidence of conversion; the ordinances (the Lord's Supper and baptism) were administered to those who did not even profess to be Christians; discipline of those "whose walk was evidently contrary to the Gospel" was lacking; there was increasing loss



of independence of the local church and control by outside councils; and a large group of the members felt that many essential teachings of Scripture were omitted from the preaching of their pastor. In the "regular churches" educated men, "if orthodox in doctrine and regular in their lives," were admitted to the ministry without necessity of personal faith. Thirty men, including one deacon, and a large number of women withdrew at one time from the Norwich church and others followed. The majority of the church became 'Separatists' and "out-voted the Old Church at the Town Meetings," declaring they would no longer pay the rates of the minister, as they were conscientiously opposed to the union of Church and State. The General Court interfered and imposed a special tax; those who would not pay were imprisoned. Forty or more people were imprisoned within a single year, both men and women, and these imprisonments continued for several years. Among those imprisoned for nonpayment of the church tax in 1752 were Isaac Backus' mother and brother. His mother had been regularly attending and supporting the Separate Church for seven years at the time of her arrest. The 54-year old Widow Backus is described at the time of her arrest as "sick, and, thickly wrapped in clothes to produce perspiration, sitting near the fire by her stand and reading the family Bible. The officers thought that, under the circumstances, she would yield and pay the rates. But Mrs. Backus was not the woman to abandon her religious principles." Her letter about her imprisonment has been called a prison epistle—

*Norwich, Nov. 4, 1752. My dear Son; I have heard something of the trials amongst you of late, and I was grieved till I had strength to give up the case to God, and leave my burden there. And now I would tell you something of our trials. Your brother Samuel lay in prison twenty days. October 15th, the collectors came to our house and took me away to prison, about nine o'clock in a dark, rainy night. We lay in prison thirteen days, and were then set at liberty, by what means I know not. Whilst I was there a great many people came to see me, and some said one thing and some said another. Oh the innumerable snares and temptations that beset me! more than I ever thought of before. But oh, the condescension of Heaven! though I was bound when I was cast into*

*this furnace, yet I was loosed and found Jesus in the midst of the furnace with me. Oh, then I could give up my name, estate, family, life and breath freely to God. Now the prison looked like a palace to me. I could bless God for all the laughs and scoffs made at me. Oh the love that flowed out to all mankind; then I could forgive as I would desire to be forgiven, and love my neighbor as myself. Deacon Griswold was put in prison the 8th of October, and yesterday old brother Grover, and they are in pursuit of others, all which calls for humiliation. This church has appointed the 13th of November to be spent in prayer and fasting on that account. I do remember my love to you and your wife, and the dear children of God with you, begging your prayers for us in such a day of trial. We are all in tolerable health, expecting to see you. These from your loving mother,*

ELIZABETH BACKUS.

The separation of these members from the Norwich Church remained permanent in spite of persecution and resulted in the formation of a large body of "Separate" or "New-Light" churches. Soon after the Separate Church was organized in Norwich, Backus entered the ministry. He describes his call in September 1746 as follows:

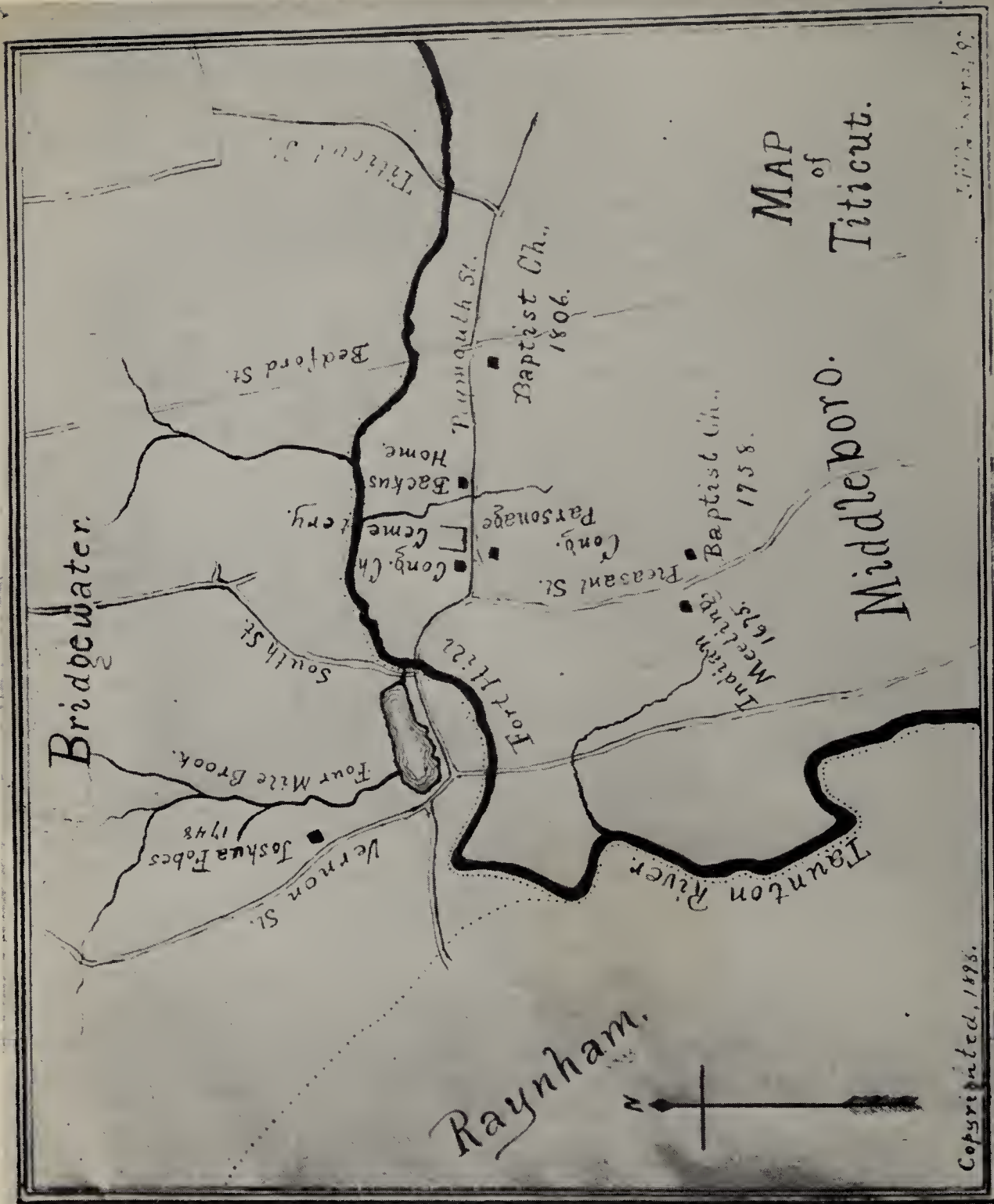
*Hitherto a private life had been my choice and delight, but a new scene was before me, which I had no idea of till I was led into it in the following manner. Being at a certain house where a number of the saints were met, the command, "pray ye the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His harvest," was read and spoken upon. A conviction seized my mind that God had given me abilities which His church had a right to the use of, and which I could not withhold with a clear conscience.*

Almost immediately Backus set out upon the first of a long series of preaching tours, of which he made at least eight in the next twelve months.

#### HIS COMING TO TITICUT

Late in 1747, Backus visited Rev. Joseph Snow, pastor of a Separatist Church in Providence, who told him of a needy field in Massachusetts and came to Titicut with him for a visit. Snow and Backus preached alternately for 10 days,





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Backus preaching 24 sermons. As Backus says, "They appeared to be in reality hungering for spiritual food." Backus was visited by the Precinct Committee and invited to become minister of the parish upon approval of the neighboring pastors. He did not accept the conditional invitation of the Precinct Committee, but he did accept the invitation of the people of Titicut parish and was ordained pastor of the Separatist Church there on April 13, 1748. Although Backus continued his evangelistic tours beyond his parish, travelling 800 miles during his first year at Titicut, the membership of the home church almost doubled in that first year.

As has been mentioned before, Backus found an Indian church at Titicut when he came there; there were three Indian churches in Middleborough. In his letter to the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1794, Backus refers to John Cotton's letter of Sept. 14, 1674, in which he called Ketchiquit (the Indian name for Titicut) "a place of praying Indians." Says Backus: "A Baptist church was formed among them. When I came into the place in 1747, John Symons was the minister of



Elder Backus' homestead on Plymouth Street



that church. One of the Indians in Titicut was prevailed with to give five acres for their meeting house lot, and two others gave each of them fifteen acres of good land for the ministry." This Indian meeting house was built in 1675 on what is now Pleasant Street. (Its location may be seen on the map on page 8.) As the Indians removed from Titicut, they sold their lands, the last being sold around 1760.

During his early years in Titicut, Backus bought a small farm "for upwards of 83 pounds" from an Indian woman, Hannah Robbin; this was his home for the rest of his life. On November 29, 1749, Backus married Susanna Mason of Rehoboth, a descendant of Sampson Mason, one of the founders of Swansea and a member of the Baptist church there, which was founded in 1663. When Backus was 76 years old, he described his wedding and concluded: "Thus Susanna Mason of Rehoboth became the companion of my life for nearly fifty-one years, and the greatest temporal blessing which God ever gave me; for which I trust I shall praise him to eternity."

#### BAPTIST BEGINNINGS IN TITICUT

David Weston, in his account of "100 years of Baptist history" dates the beginning of the movement of formation of Baptist churches by secession from New Light or Separate churches at about the year 1750. In 1750 there were in all America only 58 Baptist churches. The movement which led Backus and other Separatists to withdraw from the "regular church" quite naturally eventuated in their adoption of Baptist principles: They objected to church membership of any except believers; a regenerate church membership is the outstanding doctrine of the churches they formed.

In August 1749, members of the Separate Church in Titicut began to be disturbed and to debate heatedly over the question of baptism. Backus tried "in his secret approaches to the throne of grace, to give up this case to God." His inability to arrive at a quick decision on the problem indicates his desire for honesty and for the Holy Spirit's guidance. For a time he would think the Baptist way right; then he would return to the manner of baptism of his church. In September 1749, during Backus' absence from his church, a Baptist elder, Ebenezer Moulton of Brimfield, visited Titicut, preached, and immersed ten members of Backus' church. These "Baptist brethren" attempted to form a Baptist church



Early "baptistry," a stream alongside present Terwilliger residence

in February 1750, but it was soon dissolved, and some of them joined the Baptist Church in Swansea. Baekus was greatly troubled. "No tongue can tell the distress I now felt," he says. He prayerfully studied the Scripture; finally on August 22, 1751, he submitted to immersion himself by Brother Benjamin Pierce of Warwick, R. I. In his Diary Backus writes, "Then and afterwards in the evening I felt a sweet calmness of mind, and some things opened with special clearness. Blessed be God." For more than four years he continued ministering, on the principle of open communion, in the Separate Church, many of its members being Baptists and others cleaving to the principles and practices of pedobaptism. Thus it was that for a decade Baekus was numbered among the Separationists of New England Congregationalism.

The calmness which Backus felt in his own mind after submission to immersion was not the mood of the church for these four years. Such variance of opinion among the people caused strife, though sincere efforts were made on both sides. In his History Backus comments that "edification, the great end of Christian society, was marred instead of be-



ing promoted.” And David Weston writes concerning the situation in Titicut:

*The Baptist and the Separate Congregational churches were bound together by the closest of ties. The former left the latter from no ill feeling but with heartiest love, and this love continued, on both sides, after their separation. Their members had been converted together in the Great Awakening; together they had come out from the Standing Order; together they had suffered and were still suffering for the truth; they had the same enemies and oppressors; they felt the force of the same unjust and cruel laws; their plundered goods were sold at the same auctions, and their bodies confined in the same prisons; they had many kindred views and feelings, by which they sympathized most closely, and in which there were no others to sympathize with them.*

The time for the formation of a Baptist church in Titicut had come. Though still reluctant to sever ties with the people



First site of the First Baptist Church in Middleborough (north corner of present Stewart property)

“Aye, call it holy ground,  
The soil where first they trod:  
They have left unstained what there they found—  
Freedom to worship God!”

who loved him and were loved by him, it seemed the only thing to do. He wrote to his mother about it:

*I am convinced that it is neither agreeable nor expedient for those who differ so widely about the first ordinance of the gospel (viz., baptism) as we do, to . . . try to go on together in the special ordinances of the church; yet, at the same time, I would earnestly labor to maintain all Christian love and freedom in things wherein we are agreed. . . . For aught I know this news may be grievous to your mind; which grief, because of the tenderness of love between us I would be loath to cause; yet I am persuaded you are sensible that every one must practise according to the clearest light he has, let who will be of a different mind.*

On January 16, 1756, several people met in the home of Isaac Backus and organized the "Baptist Church of Christ in Middleborough Bridgewater and Raynham." In his Manuscript Diary, Backus wrote:

*And my soul had a very weighty sense of the greatness of the affairs before us and of the infinite importance of carefully keeping to the rules of Christ's house both in admitting members, and also in after dealings with them. And had not my soul believed that Christ would go before me, I should not have dared to step forward, but being satisfied of that (after some free discourse with our brethren who do not see with us,) I read the Articles and Covenant which I had drawn, and then proceeded, solemnly, in the presence of God and his people, to sign them; and the following brothers and sisters signed with me, viz., Timothy Briant and John Hayward, Mary Caswell, Esther Fobes and my dear consort. And there appeared a good degree of solemnity and sense of divine things in acting therein.*

Elder Backus was ordained as their pastor on June 23rd of that year, and their first deacon, Nathaniel Shaw, was ordained August 14th. For almost a year no plans were made about building a meeting house. Then, on December 30th, the members (now 14 of them) met at Backus' home, "chose Lieut. Benj. White Moderator, and agreed to build a house on Paul Hathaway's land." On the 23rd of December, 1757, it

was "raised." The building was not completed until the spring of 1761, which indicates that for five years the church met at the pastor's home. The Records disclose that there were 41 members by the end of 1760.

Deacon Nathaniel Shaw was the principal builder, but all the members, including the pastor, entered into the labor. The work seems to have been modeled after the building of Solomon's temple:

*One contributed one thing, another that; some "fell timber" in the forests, some "worked at the swamps," some "drew laths from the swamp," some made board nails—others shingle nails or lath nails, some furnished pine boards, others oak boards, and others "oak clap-boards." And so the house was builded.*

The building was 36 feet long and 30 feet broad. "The pews were 5 feet deep all around the house. There were 10 or more gallery pews." The location of the church may be found on the early map of Titicut. (See page 8.)



THE CONFESSION OF FAITH AND COVENANT OF  
THE BAPTIST CHURCH OF CHRIST IN  
MIDDLEBOROUGH BRIDGEWATER AND  
RAYNHAM—

(1) *We Believe that there is but one only the living and true God, who is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his Being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness & truth.* (2) *That there are three Persons in the God-head, the Father, Son, and holy Ghost who are but one God, the same in Substance equal in power and glory.* (3) *That the holy Scriptures of the old and new Testaments are the Word of God which he hath given as our only perfect rule of faith and practice.* (4) *That God who is infinite in knowledge and perfectly views all things from the begining to the end of time, hath foreordained that whatsoever comes to pass, either by his order or permission shall work for the eternal glory of his great Name.*

(5) *In the Begining God created heaven and earth, the sea & all that in them is; and he upholds & governs all things by the word of his Power.* (6) *That God made man in his own image in knowledge righteousness and true holiness, and made with him a Covenant of Life the Condition whereof was perfect obedience.* (7) *Man being left to himself, soon fell from that happy and glorious estate in which he was made by eating the forbidden fruit; whereby he brought himself and all his posterity into a state of death.* (8) *Man being thus dead, his help & recovery is wholley in & from God.* (9) *God the Father of his mear good pleasure from all eternity hath chosen a number of poor lost men, in Christ Jesus to eternal Salvation.* (10) *Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God hath come and taken on him human Nature, and in that nature hath yielded a perfect obedience to the law that we have broken, & suffered death for our Sins: and hath brought in a compleate and everlasting Righteousness, and hath risen & ascended to the right hand of God & ever livith to make Intercession for us.* (11) *The holy Ghost, and he only can & doth make a particular application of the Redemption purchased by Christ to every Elect Soul.* (12) *The Spirit of God applies this redemption by convincing us of our sinful lost & miserable condition, and then discovering ye glorious Saviour as he is offered to us in the gospel in his sutableness and sufficiency and enabling us to imbrace him*

*with our whole souls whereby he is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, & redemption. (13) The life of Religion consists in the knowledge of God and conformity to him in the inward man; which necessarily produceth an external conformity to his Law & brings us to live in obedience to his holy will in all our ways, and in our several places and relations. (14) True Believers being united to Jesus Christ by faith, have Communion with God, & by his Spirit they are united to each other & have communion one with another, whereby they are made partakers of each others gifts and graces.*

*(15) We believe that the first day of the week commonly called the Lords-day is the Christian Sabbath. (16) That God hath appointed the Ordinance of civil government for the defending the poor as well as the rich in their civil rights and privileges: and the civil magistrates work is to punish moral evils and to encourage moral vertue, without touching upon anything that infringes upon the Conscience, or pretending to dictate & govern in the worship of the eternal God; which belongs only to Jesus Christ the great Lawgiver & Head of his Church. (17) We believe there will be a general Ressurrection, both of the just and unjust; and that God hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ, & will reward every man according to his works; when the Wicked shall be sent into everlasting punishment, and the Righteous be received into life eternal.*

#### SECOND PART CONCERNNG CHURCH AFFAIRS—

*(1) We believe that a visible Church of Christ is a number of his saints & people by mutual acquaintance & communion voluntarily and understandingly covenanting and embodying together for the carrying on the Worship & Service of God. (2) That Baptism & the Lords Supper are ordinances of Christ to be continued until his Second coming, and that the former is requisite to the latter: that is to say, that those are to be admitted into the communion of the Church and to partake of all its ordinances who upon profession of their faith have been baptized, by immersion in the Name of the Father, & of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. (3) Since none but Saints can rightly partake of these Ordinances; therefore the door of the Church sho'd be carefully kept at all times against all such as can't give Scriptural evidences of their union to Christ by faith. (4) A Church thus gather'd hath power*



to chuse and ordain those officers that Christ hath appointed in his Church, namely Bishops or Elders & Deacons: & also to depose such officers as evidently appear to walk conterary to the gospel, & to discipline their members; tho' in some such cases it is convenient and profitable to request the advice of neighbouring churches of Christ.

(5) A Bishop, or Elder hath no more power to decide any case or controversy in the Church than any private Brother; yet they having superior gifts for teaching and ruleing, ought to exercise and improve the same for the benifit of the church, & ye church ought to be subject to the gifts bestowed on the minister from the Lord, while he is rightly acting in his place,—whose work is, to lead in the actings of ye church, and to administer ye Sacraments and devote himself to ye work of teaching, warning, rebukeing & exorting the people, publicly and from house to house. (6) The Deacon's office work is to take care of the poor and to have the oversight of the temporal affairs of the Church, & to minister at the Lords-table. (7) Every Saint is commanded to be faithful to improve every gift & talent that is bestowed on them:—in order to which there ought to be such a gospel freedom that the church may know where every particular gift is, that it may be improv'd in its proper place & to its right end, even the glory of God, and the good of his people;—and the Church ought to be subject to such Improvements.

#### THE COVENANT

We do now in the presence of the great allseeing and most glorious God; and before Angels & Men give up our selves to the Lord Jehovah, Father, Son, & Holy Ghost, & avouch him this day to be our God, our Father, our Saviour and our Leader and receive him as our Portion forever.—

We give up ourselves unto the Lord Jesus Christ and adhere to him as the Head of his people in the Covenant of grace, & rely on him as our Prophet Priest and King to bring us to eternal blessedness. We acknowledge our everlasting & indispensable obligation to glorify our God by living a holy righteous & godly life in this present world, in all our several places & relations: and we do engage by the assistance of the divine Spirit to improve all our time & strength, talents and advantages for his glory & the good of our fellowmen; promising by divine help to walk in our houses with a perfect heart and to train up those under our care in the ways of

God.—And we also give up our selves to one another in Covenant, promising to act towards each other as Bretherin in Christ, watching over one another in the Love of God; and to watch not only against (them that are reckned) more gross evils, but also against all foolish talking & jesting which is not convenient;—vain disputeing about words & things which gendure strife;—disregarding promises & not fulfilling of engagements; Tattling and backbiteing; spending time idly at taverns or elsewhere, and vain & unnecessary worldly Conversation on Lords-days, and whatsoever else that is contrary to Sound Doctrine according to the glorious gospel of Christ.—Promising to hold communion together in the worship of God, & in ye ordinances & discipline of his Church; according as we are or shall be guided by the Spirit of God in his word; expecting that he will yet further & more gloriously open his word & ye mysteries of his kingdom:—flying to ye blood of ye everlasting Covenant for ye pardon of our many errorrs and, praying that the Lord would prepare and strengthen us for every good work to do his will, working in us that which is well pleasing in his sight thro' Jesus Christ, to whome be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

## DISCIPLINE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

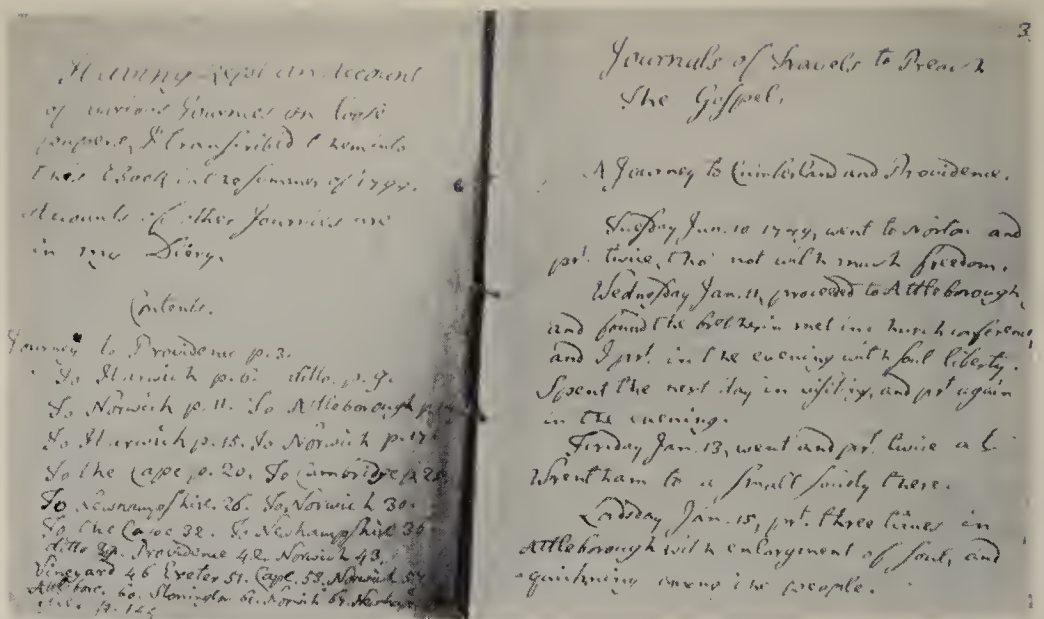
In our "enlightened" 1956, when a man's sins, needs, and sorrows are the concern of only his psychiatrist, the thought of church discipline is foreign and distasteful. But, if there were excesses in administering church discipline in by-gone days, our generation has certainly gone to the opposite extreme. Indeed, now the cry of man often is that of the Psalmist, "No man cares for my soul!"

Two hundred years ago, when this church came into being, and for many years thereafter, someone did care. The members solemnly pledged: "We also give up ourselves to one another in Covenant, promising to act towards each other as Bretherin in Christ, watching over one another in the Love of God." Repeatedly in the Church Records when an account is given of receiving new members, we read that they "placed themselves under the watch and care of the church." They took very seriously Article 13 of the Confession of Faith (see page 16) that a Christian's life is to conform to God's standards, and they were careful not only of "them that are reckned more gross evils" but also of "the little sins that war against the soul." A difficulty arose between two of the six original members of the church in the early days. The sin of Sister Fobes was in "borrowing a thimble, some pins, needles, thread, &c. and not paying;" Brother Hayward's resentment and that of his wife led to accusations that Sister Fobes was "under the government of a Covetous & dishonest principle," and to his withdrawing from communion. The church was keenly exercised about this matter from October 1756 to June 1759.

The most frequent matter for discipline was absence from the services of the church. An entry on May 9, 1776, is illustrative: "The pastor was ordered to write to several members to come on June 6 at 1 o'clock & give the reasons of their absenting themselves from our communion." Temporal as well as spiritual needs of the flock were the care of the church. The deacons were instructed to care for the needs of poor widows "and every other pour of the Church and bring in their Bill."

*"Blest was the tie that bound  
Their hearts in Christian love."*





## ISAAC BACKUS AS A TRAVELING EVANGELIST

Isaac Backus began his preaching tours almost immediately after that cottage prayer meeting in September 1746 in which “a conviction seized his mind that God had given him abilities which His church had a right to the use of, and which he could not withhold with a clear conscience.” His journeys were fruitful in many ways. On one to Rehoboth in the first year after his call to the ministry he met the girl who was to become his wife. A few months later, on his journey to Titicut, he found the field which he served so well as pastor for the rest of his life. According to the Dictionary of American Biography, Backus’ “activities there made Middleboro the strongest Baptist community in Massachusetts during his lifetime.”

Backus continued his evangelistic journeys after coming to Titicut. In December 1780, for example, he wrote in his Manuscript Biography: “In the year which is now closed I have traveled 1918 miles and preached 248 times.” During four months of 1789 he visited Virginia and North Carolina, traveling 1200 miles and preaching 117 sermons. A summary of his evangelistic journeys extending more than 10 miles in length, from January 1748 through December 1802, shows that he made 918 such trips, aggregating over 68,600 miles. He was a one-man Society for the Promotion and Propagation of the Gospel.

## BACKUS AS A WRITER

How one man could be active in so many fields of endeavor is almost beyond comprehension. And all he did was done whole-heartedly. Mr. Lawrence B. Romaine of the Middleborough Historieal Society has noted that Baekus subscribed to every current publication of his day. The Massachusetts Historical Society had but recently been organized when Baekus contributed an "aneient history" of Middleborough (Collections 1794, Vol. III). Also "carefully made for the use of the Massaehusetts Historical Society by their humble servant, Isaee Baekus," were eopies of letters of historieal importanee which had eome to his attention. He drew up the excellently comprehensive and doetrinally sound Confession of Faith and Covenant of his own ehureh, and the Records of the church were written in his own hand for many years. Starr's *Baptist Bibliography* lists 50 titles of books and pamphlets published by Baekus.

His largest literary effort was his three volume "History of New England, with particular reference to the Denomination of Christians ealled Baptists." These volumes were published in 1777, 1784, and 1796; and a one-volume Abridgement in 1804. His Aeount Book shows that, in 1779, Volume I sold for twenty dollars each. George Baneroft ealls him "one of the most exaet of our New England historians."



Desk of Elder Baekus



## BACKUS THE PATRIOT

It is true that during a man's lifetime his contributions are not fully appreciated because of a lack of perspective; and, as the great poet said, when great men die, "the good is oft interred with their bones." Great men expend their energies in achieving the things which are of utmost importance to us, but when we have them in our possession we often "take them for granted" and fail to appreciate how much we owe. This is especially applicable to the legacy of Isaac Backus as the defender of religious liberty. His contribution to the American way of life is one of the most precious freedoms we possess. Without the freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own individual consciences, we would be truly in bondage.

Backus lived in the century after the great influx of Europeans who had been oppressed on their own shores by the demand for religious conformity. They left their homes and came to foreign soil to find a place where they might be unmolested by religious oppression. The American poet was wrong when she said of the Pilgrims: "They left unstained what there they found / Freedom to worship God." That freedom was stained, and very soon. In 1631 the General Court in Boston required that those "admitted to the freedom of this body politic" must be members of *some* of the churches. In 1635 the Court asked the churches to devise "a uniform order of discipline in the churches." The next year's act of the General Assembly placed the churches under the jurisdiction of the civil magistrates. It stated that assemblies for worship would not be approved "without they shall first acquaint the magistrates and the elders of the greater part of the churches in this jurisdiction with their intention and have their approbation therein." As the present pastor of this church wrote in his seminary thesis on Isaac Backus and the separation of church and state: "Thus the right to assemble, except in the church which was fast becoming the established body, derived not from the leading of the Spirit, but rather from permission by the church that used the state to block all competition." In this same year Roger Williams was ordered out of Massachusetts and in 1637 all Jesuits were banished from the colony under threat of death.

These early incidents indicate the growing trend toward the establishment of a state church in Massachusetts. The

church was supported by taxes; rates were assessed to everyone within the jurisdiction or parish of a "regular church." Isaac Baekus' grandfather was expelled from the church in Norwich for opposing the authority of civil magistrates over the church. His mother and brother were imprisoned for refusal to pay the rates of the minister of the established church, whereas they worshipped in another assembly; and Elder Backus himself was arrested for the same offense. To appease the "dissenters," they were finally permitted to have writs to excuse them from taxation to support the state church, but they were writs of toleration. Dissenters were humiliated in order to obtain the writs; they must admit the right of the magistrate to demand their payment of the church tax. Baekus did not ask for toleration; he asked for liberty. The Editor of the Watchman Examiner in 1893 pointed out succinctly the distinction: "Toleration is for the magistrate to say to us, 'I will not give you the right to think and worship as you please, but I will wink at your violation of the law.' Liberty is for you to say to me, 'I shall believe and worship God according to the dictates of my own conscience, and I disclaim your right to impose, in these matters, any law upon me'."

Isaac Baekus became the standard bearer of those who denied to the civil government any authority in matters pertaining to religion. His conviction that the church should be independent of the state was so strong that he made it a part of the Confession of Faith which he drew up for this church. (See Article 16, page 16.) Baekus wrote newspaper articles and pamphlets, appealing to the people to recognize the threat of authoritarianism and to stand firm for religious liberty. This church agreed with its pastor's stand for religious liberty. The following entry from the Records (Sept. 2, 1773) stresses their common interest: "Deacon Shaw and our bretherin Elijah Coddington, Job Macomber & Benjamin Leach were appointed with our elder to attend the association at Medfield, & to acquaint the churches with our willingness to join with them in publishing a testimony against the civil powers imposing any taxes to support religious worship." This meeting was an eventful one. In September 1774, Baekus was sent to the Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia bearing a letter of introduction from which the following excerpt is taken:

*We, the elders and brethren of twenty Baptist churches, met in association at Medfield, twenty miles from Boston, September 14, 1774, have unanimously chosen and sent unto you the reverend and beloved Mr. Isaac Backus, as our agent, to lay our case, in these respects, before you, or otherwise to use all the prudent means he can for our relief.*

He and President Manning of Rhode Island College (now Brown University) pleaded eloquently for religious freedom in the Colonies. The delegates from Massachusetts to the Convention insisted that the claims of oppression of the Baptists were unwarranted, and it is reported that John Adams told them if they "meant to effect a change in their measures respecting religion," they "might as well attempt to change the course of the sun in the heavens." Some rather glib promises of redress of grievances were given, but the Massachusetts delegates were vindictive, and R. T. Paine is reported to have spread the story "that Mr. Backus went to Philadelphia in order to prevent the colonies from uniting in defense of their liberties."

Newspapers abounded with accusations against Backus. In one he was threatened with a halter and the gallows. The charge that he opposed the cause of the Colonists was of course false. On the morning after April 19, 1775, when the first shot was fired by the British in Lexington, Isaac Backus in his sermon condemned the act of the British and espoused the cause of the Colonists. He repeatedly urged the young men of Titicut to enlist, and rejoiced when they did. Never did the Colonists have a more loyal servant than he who led the Baptist cause.

As Agent for the Baptists, Backus continued to address appeals and protests to the people of the Colonies, to Christians, to the Provincial Congress (1774), to the General Court in Watertown (1775) and in Boston (1780), to George Washington (1790). He continued his energetic activities in the Warren Association. Under the direction of that body, met in 1777 at Warren, he drew up a letter to all the Baptist societies asking for a general meeting of their delegates for devising the best means of attaining their religious freedom. In 1777 he read an address on the subject of religious freedom before the Warren Association, and another in 1778. By unanimous request of that body these addresses were print-



ed and distributed. For many years the Warren Association appointed annually a "Committee on Grievances" whose duty it was to learn of the oppressions of their brethren and appeal for relief to the General Court. This Committee was extremely important, for, if the injustices suffered by a minority group were to be redressed, they must be presented in an organized manner. It is small wonder that Isaac Backus was appointed Chairman of this Committee for ten successive years.

Isaac Backus worked principally as Agent for the Baptists of Massachusetts in attempting to obtain what he sometimes called "soul liberty"—the right of every man to worship God in the church of his choice, and freedom from coercion in matters of the spirit. But his influence spread beyond the Baptist ranks in awakening a spirit in favor of perfect liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state.

The arguments and appeals which he distributed slowly awakened the people and moulded public opinion. We regret that this great apostle of religious liberty did not live to see his goal accomplished, but we can thank God for the heritage of freedom bestowed upon us by Isaac Backus.

**1904589**

## LATER HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

In the year of Isaac Baekus' death, 1806, the second church was built; it was on the corner of Plymouth Street and Bedford Road, a little back from the location of the present building. Baekus continued as pastor until his death, though an entry in the Records on September 9, 1804, when he was eighty, indicates his weakening condition: "As our pastor is often poorly, the church agreed to invite elder Ezra Kendal to come and preach to us four Sabbaths." The church over which Baekus was spiritual watchman for fifty years was always small. It is recorded, however, that in 1779, the time of spiritual awakening throughout this area, "a pleasant revival" began and increased the membership in three years from 59 to 138. Baekus preached not only from the pulpit on the Lord's Day, but also from house to house during the week. The stone first erected in his memory said, "As the pastor of a church in this town for fifty-eight years he was eminently useful and beloved."

The second church was torn down in the summer of 1894, and the present building erected that summer, and dedicated December 13 - 18 of the same year. Through the years this church has also been "the germ of several other Baptist churches and the nursing mother of several distinguished ministers of the Gospel."



Second home of the First Baptist Church



Our Missionaries, the Johnsons, in Burma

## PASTORS 1756 - 1956

Isaac Baekus, founder	1756-1806	Otis O. Ordway	1895-1897
Samuel Abbott	1807-1816	George F. Beecher	1897-1900
Silas Hall	1819-1822	Frank L. Cann	1900-1901
Shubael Lovell	1826-	Alfred S. Hill	1901-1903
Jeremiah Kelley	1829-1831	J. R. Lawrence	1903-1907
Asa Niles	1832-1833	C. W. Williams	1907-1912
Avery Briggs	1834-1838	Lewis A. Eaton	1912-1916
Silas Hall	1839-1847	Charles W. Dealtry	1916-1921
James Andem	1847-1849	(Temporary supplies)	1921-1923
Silas Hall	1850-1851	R. A. Stonebraker	1923-1924
Lorenzo Tandy	1852-1856	E. J. Church	1924-1925
Samuel Richardson	1856-1862	H. Y. Vinal	1925-1932
Alexander McLearn	1862-1865	H. C. Bonell	1932-1934
Joseph Hutcheson	1865-1875	Ralph Nichols	1934-1935
George L. Ruberg	1875-1879	W. F. Rogers	1935-1936
S. T. Livermore	1879-1880	E. H. Prescott	1936-1942
Henry C. Coombs	1880-1885	(Temporary supplies)	1942-1943
Benjamin F. Turner	1886-1887	S. A. Washburn	1943-1944
James W. Tingley	1887-1888	L. C. Decker	1944-1945
Irving Coombs	1889-1890	K. E. Unger	1945-1948
J. W. Brown	1890-1891	Charles Schenck	1948-1950
James W. Tingley	1891-1892	Richard Mullin	1950-1953
Douglas H. Simpson	1892-1894	Edward Lyon	1953-

## PRESENT OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH

### *Pastor*

Rev. Edward Lyon

### *Asst. to Pastor*

Mr. George Dimock

### *Deacons*

Mr. B. M. White

Mr. R. D. Pinkham

Mr. James Lakey

### *Deaconesses*

Mrs. Graee White Burt

Mrs. James Wilmot

### *Organist*

Mrs. Waldo Thomas

### *Moderator*

Mr. Kenneth Lakey

### *Clerk*

Mrs. Kenneth Lakey

### *Treasurer*

Mrs. James Wilmot

### *Missionary Treasurer*

Mrs. Arthur Craig

### *Improvement Fund Treas.*

Mrs. Herbert Cowan

### *Auditor*

Mr. Waldo Thomas

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Pastor

Deacons

Mr. Herbert Cowan

Mr. George Dimock

Mrs. Gregory Mellin

Mrs. Edward Lyon

### *Advisory Committee:*

Pastor

Deacons

Mrs. Herbert Cowan

Mrs. Arthur Craig

Mrs. Walter Savard

Mrs. James Wilmot

### *Sunday School Supt.*

Mr. Edward Lyon

### *Asst. Supt.*

Mr. George Dimock

### *Sunday School Seeretary*

Miss Ruth Craig

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Rev. Edward Lyon

### *Author of articles in the*

### *Memorial Booklet*

Mrs. Edward Lyon

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Mr. Kenneth Lakey





## GREETINGS

This year marks another milestone for the Backus Memorial Baptist Church. Two hundred years ago this church was founded as the "First Baptist Church of Christ of Middleborough Bridgewater and Raynham." It was the fourteenth Baptist church to be established in the Massachusetts Colony (four of which are now extinct). In 1750 there were in the Colonies only 58 Baptist churches. Today, though the geographical limits of our parish have decreased, the vision of the church is growing, for the Lord has blessed us in many ways this past year.

As a church we are privileged and proud to offer to the public a memorial of Isaac Backus in the form of this booklet. In America we gather unhindered to worship. This is a heritage we owe in a large part to Isaac Backus and others like him.

Greater even than his efforts for religious and civil liberty was the personal life of Elder Backus. Rev. Silas Hall, one of the early pastors of this church who sat under the ministry of Elder Backus had this to say of him:

*I have often heard that good man pray. The efficacy of his prayers did not consist in length, nor gaudy dress; but it seemed that he and his God loved one another, and that he was at home before the Throne of Grace. I heard the last sermon which he ever preached. It was delivered in his dwelling house, from I Peter ii.9. I remember well the piety, pathos, and unusual earnestness which characterized that discourse. His religion made him willing to die.*

I have spent many rewarding hours studying the life and works of Elder Backus. I can say of a truth I am proud to be the pastor of the church he founded, for it is a living memorial of all that Baptists hold dear in faith and practice. I would urge the members of this church—and all Christians—to follow the example of Isaac Backus, who not only believed the promise of God, “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free,” but sought with conviction to secure that freedom to all men.

The Elder rode thousands of miles, preached thousands of sermons, spent long hours writing to achieve his purpose that all men might hear the Gospel and that Christians might have the right to assemble freely to worship God. And this is our task—to take the Gospel of Christ to all men, to bring the message of liberty to all who are enslaved by the forces of sin. May God grant to us a vision such as controlled Elder Isaac Backus.

EDWARD N. LYON, *Pastor*

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## BICENTENNIAL HYMN

Through the mist of years I can seem to see  
A group on their knees in prayer,  
In the eventide, asking God to guide  
The church they were founding there.

### *Chorus.*

Let us turn back the years and we'll see again  
Those humble beginnings long ago.  
Grace and peace there were found;  
Surely 'tis holy ground —  
A place where God dwelleth below.

Those six lowly saints in their Elder's home  
Were of earnest and solemn mind,  
Yielded to the Lord, and with one accord  
A Confession and Cov'nant signed.

Through two hundred years God has faithful been  
To His promises claimed that night.  
As in days of yore, may we more and more  
In His service our hearts unite.

*—Words submitted by Mrs. Edward Lyon*



### THANK YOU—

The pastor wishes to add his sincere thanks to the following, whose invaluable assistance has not already been recognized in this Memorial Booklet: Mrs. Harry Ryder, Mr. and Mrs. Elliott H. Perkins, Mr. Lawrence B. Romaine, the Backus Historical Society, the Middleborough Historical Society, and the Massachusetts Historical Society. And a word of personal appreciation is extended to each member of the Bicentennial Committee, who labored so faithfully and well for the commemoration of the history of this church and for the glory of the Lord.

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